DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 845 HE 012 270

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TITLE The Need for Basic Skills in Colleges and Universities.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the International Reading Association (Atlanta, GA, April 26, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Admission (School); *Basic Skills; College Students; Educational Economics; *Educational History; Enrollment Trends; Higher Education; Learning Laboratories; Minority Groups; Nontraditional Students; Program Descriptions; *Reading Skills; *Remedial Programs; Student Characteristics; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Niagara University NY

ABSTRACT

The need for basic skills instruction at the college level is discussed in light of the history of United States educational standards, changes in college student populations, and indicators of need for basic skills programs. Historically, it appears as if basic skills instruction has always been needed at the college level to aid the underprepared student. World War II and the civil rights movement are cited as having caused drastic changes in the character and composition of the student population. It is suggested that objections to basic skills instruction at the college level have grown as the need has grown and may be attributed to the increased cost of providing this service. Declining enrollments, lowered admissions standards, and the growing number of nontraditional students has increased the need for basic skills instruction during a time of financial exigency. The basic skills program implemented at Niagara University in New York is described. The University established a learning center and students in the program are closely monitored. (SF)

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The Need for Basic Skills in Colleges and Universities

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Presented April 26, 1979
International Reading Association
Atlanta, Georgia

NE012 220

The Need for Basic Skills in Colleges and Universities

"Why can't they be like we were-
Perfect in every way-
Oh, what's the matter with kids today?"

These words from the rock musical, "Bye, Bye, Birdie," reflect a growing discontent on the part of the American public with the products of our school systems at all levels, but the chorus is amplified when a discussion of education turns to colleges and universities and the idea of basic skills being taught to college students. "You teach reading courses at the college level?" The note of incredulity is immediately discernible when this question is asked of an instructor in a basic skills program. "How did 'they' get into college if 'they' can't read?" Or, one is asked, "how did 'they' get a high school diploma if 'they' can't write?" The questioner's opinion seems to be that not all students are "college material," and if they didn't learn to read and write at twelfth grade graduation, they are doomed for life to a low-level employment situation, and restricted to just that amount of education they have already received.

Not just outsiders hold this opinion; many college and university faculty members appear to believe this also. The assumption seems to be that anyone who did not learn at the same rate and under the same conditions as his classmates is unable to learn under any conditions. The underlying suggestion is that only perfect students attended colleges in the past, and only a select few should be allowed to attend now. Certainly, a student who experiences difficulty in reading or writing is not considered "college material" by these detractors.

To understand the need for basic skill instruction, it is helpful to consider three areas in education: some history of United States' educational standards; the changes in college population; and the indicators of need for a program of basic skills. When these are clear, the logical step is to determine what a basic skills program can accomplish for a college, and how the persons responsible for implementing the program should proceed. In this paper, I will attempt to address these concerns and offer some ammunition to those of you who are involved in proving the need for either the establishment or the continuation of a basic skills program.

A Brief History

Harking back to the "good old days" may be fun, but when it is suggested that students of an earlier time were superior to today's students in their ability to read, write, perform simple mathematical functions, and generally cope in a better way with the academic requirements of society, it is important to draw conclusions only by reviewing the needs of today compared to the needs of yesteryear, and to compare the products of education in an equitable manner.

At the turn of the century, many of our nation's school-children were attending small schools where from six to eight grades were taught in the same room. Education was quite different then, and although writers in the popular press often extoll the benefits of such schooling, the unpleasantries are forgotten.

In a recent article in the Reader's Digest, for instance, the writer, Frank Armbruster, suggests that children in school at the turn of the century "were taught to read and write, and to master

basic grammer, arithmetic, history and geography by the eighth grade--which was as far as most children went in those days" (Armbruster, 1978). What is not mentioned, of course, is the level of accomplishment attained by these students, or the amount of education which would have produced truly knowledgeable citizens with an ability to think clearly and critically about the issues of the day. In fact, the number of students who attended high school in those days was extremely small. For those born in 1910, for instance, less than half of them went on to high school, and fewer still completed the requirements for a diploma (World Almanac, 1977). While eighth grade may have been the accepted grade for completion of schooling, many went only a few years, and learned just the barest amount to get them through life. This was possible because the majority would not enter professions which required much education.

If there is any doubt as to the level of accomplishment of these students, however, it is interesting to note that World War I produced widespread recognition of a problem in our schools when it was discovered, as reported by Nila Banton Smith in 1965, "that thousands of our soldiers could not read well enough to follow printed instructions used in connection with military life" (Smith, 1965). The passage of compulsory education laws in the 1920's brought more children into the schools and lengthened their stay. Increasing numbers of students obtained high school diplomas, but the 1929-30 census still reported only 17.1 percent of the students between the ages of five and seventeen were enrolled in high school. If less than half of the people over sixty-five today have diplomas, a little

computation produces a figure of eight percent of the students enrolled who actually completed high school. Today, that figure has expanded to approximately sixty-three percent of the population (World Almanac, 1977, p.223).

Even with the small number of high school graduates in the early days of our educational system, schools were not, apparently, producing all scholars. Only a few students went on to college in the past one hundred years, but basic skill instruction at the college level was necessary even then. The first college Learning Center in the United States was established in 1894 at Wellesley College (Cross, 1976). Over the years tutorial programs were introduced which aided the underprepared student. There was little objection to this if the student was either an outstanding athlete whose prowess was necessary for the enhancement of the school's reputation, or the student was able to pay for the tutorial service and, therefore, produced no hardship for the institution.

The objections to basic skills at the college level have grown as the need has grown, but much of this, I suggest, can be attributed to the cost of providing the service to a different college population than was previously known.

Population Changes

When admission to a college was largely dependent on the individual's ability to pay the tuition, the cost of basic skills instruction was not an important factor. In the last thirty years, however, college populations have undergone a dramatic metamorphosis and this has cost money. There were four major periods in recent years which, I feel, contributed to the changes: World War II and the G.I.

Bill in the 1940's; the academic panic caused by Sputnik I in 1957, and the resultant demand for more highly trained employees in the science and engineering fields; the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's; and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970's. Each new group of students from these periods was essentially the same in one way--they did not come from wealthy homes, and they could not afford to pay for special services.

When the G.I. Bill was enacted, returning soldiers swelled the ranks of college populations. The government provided the funds for tuition, housing, and fees, but those who had problems adjusting to academia encountered difficulty. For many, the cost of private tutors was impossible to assume. Colleges introduced remedial reading, writing and study skills courses on a limited basis. Perhaps, if the college population had remained stable, such courses would have evolved naturally, and by 1979 there would be no need to prove their necessity in a college curriculum. Sputnik, however, caused a change in thinking.

The products of the World War II baby boom were ready for high school and college in the 1950's. The need for a college education seemed more apparent than ever because of Sputnik and the emphasis on the need for a highly educated citizenry to keep up with the Soviets. Applications to colleges soared, and for the first time in history, there were many more applicants than colleges could accept. Those who had poor high school records, or <u>any indications of academic difficulty</u> were passed over in favor of the academic achievers. Colleges earned their reputation for elitism during this period, when no student was supposed to need extra academic help, and basic skills were not con-

sidered necessary subject areas for any self-respecting institution. An interesting aside about this period, however, is that no greater percentage of first-time enrollees completed four years of college during this era than ever had before. It seems academic superiority in high school was not a guarantee of college success.

In the early 1960's the Civil Rights Movement was the force behind the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VI, which "prohibits racial or ethnic discrimination in programs receiving federal financial assistance." (Hollander, 1978, Appendix A). The admission of minority students to colleges expanded in the sixties. Since many of these students were the products of poor public school systems, basic skill instruction gained new support, and remedial classes were reintroduced to some colleges, while still others established Learning Centers designed to provide the necessary academic support services. Much of the money for these programs came to the colleges as grants from either government or private agencies. Basic skills programs gained reputations as centers for black, underprepared students. The prevailing attitude was that these "special, new" programs were only needed to serve minority students. Establishment of a Center was a convenient, and very visible means of proving to the federal government that the colleges were providing equal educational opportunities.

For too many institutions, the basic skills area is still thought of as a minority program, but the recent influx of women students is helping to change this attitude. When the Women's Movement urged women to go back to school and prepare themselves for a career in the world outside the home, thousands heard the message and enrolled. For many, however, a substantial number of years had passed since they

last attended school.

In addition to counseling, and support groups, many women needed to review basic skills areas before they could proceed with college studies. The established Learning Centers began to service a new clientele.

Returning women are only a portion of the adult population which has decided to pursue a college education. In 1978, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that of all students registered in college, the part-time (adult) students "accounted for 39.59 percent;" the figure for two year institutions was 58.66 percent of the total population (Justice, Amperse, 1978). When forty percent of the college population in the country is basically part-time returning adults who have experienced a break in their academic career, the Learning Center or basic skills program should be a major consideration for colleges who seek to enroll these adults.

Other Indications of Need

Although the academic needs of just the groups previously mentioned --the veterans, the minorities, the adult students--would probably produce a population of students large enough to support a basic skills program on any campus, there are indications that an even greater segment of the college population needs such a program.

The halcyon days of the fifties and sixties have ended. College populations are declining, but college operational costs are increasing. There appears to be a gradual lowering of admission requirements at most colleges in an effort to maintain student body sizes that will produce enough income to cover college expenses. Faculty members do not want to face retrenchment, yet institutions which grew dramatically

in the last two decades are finding it difficult to recruit enough new students to fill out the student body. Lowering the admission standards produces a student population with less exhibited academic ability than in previous years. Added to this is the current concern about the amount of academic ability a student has actually acquired in gaining a high school diploma. The need for the introduction of basic competency tests at the high school level, to determine ability to read and write before graduation, indicates that faculty members who bemoan the lack of ability of college students to perform in freshman classes may not be exaggerating, but stating facts.

Over and over again, educational journals and the popular press indicate that student scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests are decreasing. Even if one accepts the explanation that this is happening because so many more students of lower academic rank are taking the exam than ever before, and, therefore, lowering the average score, it appears that colleges may also be accepting students with lower scores more readily than they did in the past. If admission standards are lowered, the logical question seems to be: are requirements for graduation lowered? And if they are, what does that do to a graduate's chances for gaining satisfactory employment? If requirements are not lowered, then the college appears to have placed itself in the position of offering to educate the student even if he is not academically prepared for degree work. Again, the Learning Center with a good basic skills program is needed to provide academic assistance.

Related to the need to recruit new students is the college's attempt to retain a large proportion of the entering freshman class

through a two--or--four year program. A basic skills program which offers support services can increase the number of semesters for which a student is enrolled, and, thereby, increase income to the institution and stabilize the enrollment figures.

In addition to all of the economic and academic reasons for the establishment of a skills center at the college level, educators must face the legal and moral questions which have been raised in recent years. The impact of a changing population at the college level, and the introduction of legislation at both state and federal levels which requires education of a more varied student population than ever before, have produced a multitude of questions and legal issues which must be examined.

When a college accepts a student for admission to a school of study, it implies an ability to provide that student with the instructors, materials and facilities necessary to the student's academic growth. In exchange, the college expects to be paid a sum of money to cover these services. But what if the traditional teaching techniques are not working for a student? Should the college be allowed to excuse its inability to be effective and the student expected to suffer the consequences of failure, loss of money, and time?

Perhaps, the newest implication of this question is the relationship of a college to a handicapped student accepted for study. At least one college has had to provide special service to a deaf student in a graduate class. The court ruled in Barnes vs. Converse College that the college was obligated to pay for an interpreter for the student when she attended classes (Hollander, 1978, p.67).

Regulations now cover testing situations for handicapped students,

and accessibility of buildings and programs to the student. Centralization of many services for the handicapped can be readily handled by a properly staffed Learning Center which expands beyond basic skills to cover these new areas of need. Tapes of textbooks and lectures can be made available to students with vision problems. Those with diagnosed learning dysfunctions can receive individualized aid and instruction. Audiovisual materials can enable more students to learn through a variety of instructional modes.

As long as colleges admit non-traditional students--the unprepared teenagers, the adult who needs academic review, the handicapped student with special learning needs--there will be a place for a Learning Center program on those campuses. But the establishment of such a Center is only the first step. Building an effective program is the difficult part, but experience has shown that there are certain factors which are crucial. John Roueche, professor and director of the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas at Austin, has evaluated many programs in the United States to determine which are producing the best results (Roueche, Snow, 1977). At Niagara University we are attempting to build a strong, effective basic skills program which incorporates nine major ideas distilled from Roueche's work. They are:

1. A commitment from the university to the program. This means not just a few individuals, but the trustees, the president, the vice presidents, and the deans must be supportive. The program must be all encompassing for the institution and be established as a longterm project, not just a one-year grant project which must seek new funding each year.

At Niagara, the establishment of the Learning Center was accomplished by working directly with the Executive Vice President who, in turn, kept the President informed. Support for new courses is sought from the Deans of the various schools within the University, and any new developments are reported to the Administrative Council. Although the Center originally opened with aid of monies from both state and private grant agencies, the University has gradually increased its financial support, and we are less dependent on grants each year.

2. The teachers are the key. Most particularly, the teachers must understand what should be taught, how it is best learned by the individual students, and must truly believe the students can and will learn.

Instructors for our program are hired not only because of their academic background and teaching experience but because they exhibit understanding of the underprepared student, have worked with minority students, and are willing to work in the affective as well as the cognitive domain.

3. Any courses must be developed in cooperation with the academic departments so that basic skills actually are those most needed for other academic courses.

The basic skills courses at Niagara are designed to be feeder courses for the English, Math and Biology departments. Syllabi for entry level courses in these departments are considered in designing the syllabi for remedial courses. Our developmental classes teach the same material as the individual departments, but we add additional class time to the schedule for students who need to move at a slower

pace than the regular classes.

4. The majority of the instruction for students with academic deficiencies should be individualized. This requires diagnostic work so the student is instructed at the appropriate level. It also works best if the student is well aware of what is expected of him from the very beginning. This means that the instructional staff should have training in diagnostic procedures and some knowledge of educational psychology.

Each of our courses includes diagnostic testing and interpretation of these tests to the student. By this method, we are able to point out student strengths and weaknesses and show the student the areas on which he must concentrate. Every class includes some time for individualized programming. To do this, our maximum class size is 18, and most classes are kept even smaller.

5. The Learning Center should work closely with the counseling staff to encourage the building of positive self-concepts in the Center's clientele.

Our instructors consult with the students' counselors on a frequent basis. I meet once a week with the counselors to identify any problems and discuss student progress and class attendance.

6. Peer helpers can be useful in bridging the gap for academically underprepared students. Minority students, in particular, generally respond to peers before they will respond to professional staff members or faculty. Peer helpers may also serve as tutors in a Center.

Our Center employs student aides and tutors. We attempt to use upperlevel students, and seek those who are able to relate well to others. We hold training sessions for tutors, and act as resource

persons for them in their teaching duties. The student aides handle clerical work, man the Center when the instructional staff is busy elsewhere, and greet new students as they enter the Center for the first time. We also use student classroom assistants in both our summer and our regular academic year classes. The students are carefully chosen, and are trained for these positions.

7. The Learning Center must be a place where students feel comfortable. It must be a resource center for all instructors, provide audio-visual support for instruction, and provide an atmosphere for learning.

We are a small Center, and the atmosphere is a major factor in welcoming students to it. We use posters, cartoons, etc. to add interest and color, and are careful to keep things neat and well-organized. Students find it a good place to study, and are able to find materials and equipment readily because of our careful housekeeping.

8. To avoid being labeled as the remedial department, courses in a variety of learning skills should be offered so that students from the entire university community will become involved.

In addition to remedial courses, our Center at Niagara offers study courses to all students, workshops and seminars to adults in the community, and workshops for various organizations on campus. We maintain a file of brief handouts for the drop-in student, and use these to give students a taste of our offerings so they will come back.

9. A good system of evaluation for a Center must be developed and used. Copies of evaluation reports should be widely distributed to the university or college community to gain valuable support from faculty and administration.

Niagara's Learning Center maintains records on every student who enters our program. We record test scores, class attendance, achievement levels, and suggestions for future work to be done. In addition, we record all other university courses they take, the grade they receive, and their cumulative quality point average. The first group of students we served is now completing its third semester, and we are evaluating their progress and the rate of attrition for the group.

Those who support the need for basic skills in colleges provide a necessary service to the college, the students, and the American public. Bye, Bye Birdie's lyrics were not meant to be a statement of fact. There never has been a population of students which was "perfect in every way," and today, more than ever, we need to face this reality, and challenge those who think a return to earlier educational values and systems will solve our problems. A more appropriate theme song for today's colleges comes from Bob Dylan: "the times they are a'-changin'." Recognize it, plan for it, and implement the programs. Until the high schools can produce perfect students for our colleges, basic skills programs will be needed.

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